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AUTHOR Goldman, Leo
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ABSTRACT

The report first examines relevances in the state, the federal government, business and industry, parents, the community, the school and students. The author selects the necessity of major social change as most relevant, because he considers the American society outstanding in physical technology but backward in social, humanistic and aesthetic values. Emphasis is placed on today's youth who will be able to harness technology so that it enriches rather than threatens life. Thus the counselor's function is to help youth develop into adults who will be able to cope with the problems of society. Described is the type of person who should be a counselor and how he should be educated. The report lists four educational changes which should occur: (1) avoid preparing counselors for settings which do not exist, (2) include major components in counselor education programs which deal with reality of the school where graduates will work, (3) develop professional skills not solely through textbooks but by practicing, and (4) use counselor education programs to serve as a model of teaching roles they recommend. (Author/MC)

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EDUCATING COUNSELORS FOR RELEVANCE

Leo Goldman

The City University of New York

"relevant -- bearing upon or connected with the matter in hand, to the purpose; pertinent.
Syn: applicable, germane, apposite, appropriate, suitable, fitting.
derived from Medieval Latin 'relevare' to raise, lift up."
(From the Random House Dictionary)

Whose Relevance?

The dictionary definition gives us only the general direction in which to search. We are still left with the question relevant for what?

The question in many ways should really be whose relevance? We cannot begin to speak constructively about making counselor education relevant until we know whose relevance we are speaking about. And in fact I think that here we touch upon what is perhaps the greatest problem facing counselor education today -- the fact that there are many relevances, and that the student's relevance may not be the parents', and the teacher's relevance not the student's, and the school's relevance not the community's.

Here in fact is what much of the talk of relevance is about. It is about the student's complaint that his education is not relevant to his life. It is about the black community's complaint that the school is not relevant to the characteristics and needs of its children.

Therefore, before talking about counselor education, we must first examine the different relevances and make some choices among them. It would be more than presumptuous for me to try to represent adequately the purpose or relevances of all the parties to whom counselors relate, but I should try at least to show some of the varieties and particularly some of the disparities and conflicts. Greatly oversimplified and highly impressionistic, here is just a hasty skimming of the surface.

The State -- as the major overseer of education, its conception of relevance may be seen in the criteria it uses: low dropout rate; high scores on Regents examinations, and other indices of achievement; high attendance rate; large percentage who either go on to further education or into jobs.

The Federal Government -- at least through several of its agencies, it judges the relevance of schools and colleges -- and rehabilitation agencies, and other places where counselors work -- by the extent to which the economy functions well. This means a plentiful supply of workers for the jobs that need doing; willing soldiers for the draft and volunteer armies; dependable taxpayers; and in general citizens who will vote and will support their government's efforts in fighting wars; it means also such goals as keeping highway accidents to a minimum, and maintaining a favorable balance of trade.

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Business and Industry -- they want a supply of workers who will produce efficiently and dependably, and a supply of consumers who will buy their products; and in general a populace who will support the zoning, tax and other laws which will permit businesses to operate profitably and conveniently.

Parents -- here we get quite a variety of different purposes, most of which are not harmonious with each other. From their point of view, almost all parents want what they think is in their children's best interest. For some this means employability with security and enough income to live better than the parents did. For others it means getting the grades and the other external signs that open the doors to further education, to desirable jobs, to preferred neighborhoods and spouses, and in general to what is the middle class conception of the good life, which is on the whole a pretty superficial thing, emphasizing how many cars one has, and a color TV, and a modern kitchen, and, strangely enough, how much leisure, and how much money they have to spend on leisure. I say, strangely, because finding ways to fill increasing leisure time has become one of the major problems of our time.

The Community -- here again we must speak in the plural, because there are many communities, and their goals sometimes conflict with each other. There is first the community that has made it and wants to keep it. Most of them probably don't mind others making it too, provided that they don't have to pay a price for it or face the threat of competition. This community tends to support the status quo in schools and colleges, because that status quo helps to keep things as they are, and they like things as they are.

Then there are the communities who don't like things as they are -- these are the disadvantaged, and especially the blacks, Mexican-Americans, American Indians, and Puerto Ricans. Their kids on the whole are not reaching a much better life through the schools as they are, and they want change.

The School -- then there are the several groups within the school itself. It would be ludicrous to attempt to characterize all counselors, or all school board members or all members of any other group in the schools as being alike in their goals or values. But there is a tendency for all these groups to assume that what they are doing and what they have been doing is what is relevant. Like most established institutions in society, they assume a self-perpetuating attitude and have not especially welcomed change. In fact, school and college faculties are among the more conservative members of society, conservative, that is, concerning the way they do their jobs.

For the most part, they continue to view the established traditional curriculum, and established traditional school organization, and established traditional teaching methods, as good until proved otherwise, and most of them will not give anyone much of a chance to prove otherwise.

Most educators still seem to believe, for example, in the relevance of geometry to train the mind, of Silas Marner as an example of interesting literature, of the dissection of both the earthworm and sentences as useful experiences in themselves, and the study of the grammar of a foreign language as broadening. And it still makes the newspapers when a teacher takes a class out on a boat to study ocean currents or almost any kind of field trip to study something first-hand rather than out of a book.

Students -- as a former student myself, as a parent of two students, as an erstwhile counselor of college students, as an interested observer of the educational scene for some years, and as a reader of the educational research literature, my impression is that very few students view much that happens in school or college as relevant. This is not to say that all of them are up in arms about it. Quite the contrary -- only a small fraction are. But it is even worse that most of them are resigned and accepting of school as a necessary drag, as something they have to do if they want to stay out of trouble with their parents and the authorities, or as something they have to do to receive a ticket that will be valid for the good life.

If one were to list the long-range outcomes of a good education and good guidance services, he would surely include such things as being an informed citizen; a reader of good books and newspapers; an appreciator, enjoyer and supporter of music, painting and the other arts; a critical and wise consumer, with good taste in furnishing one's home; and perhaps most important, having a conscious and committed philosophy of life. In the crowded conditions of city living, we would expect also that a good education and good guidance would enable people to live with a minimum of friction and with a maximum of good human relations with the many people they must perforce come into contact with in a day.

And finally, a good education should produce a people who will responsibly collaborate in solving the problems of polluted air and water, of ugliness in buildings, of an undersupply of hospitals, parks, and transportation; and the many other problems facing our highly complex society.

How Well Have We Done?

To me it is obvious that we have not done well enough and that in some ways matters are getting worse. Technologically we have done very well indeed, but we have failed rather badly in the human and the humanistic uses of technology. Our adult population, who are the products of schools, colleges, and guidance agencies of many kinds, mostly read mediocre newspapers - and worse, don't seem to realize it. They read, if anything, trashy books, and on the whole are abysmally uninformed about their elected officials and about the major issues being debated in the legislative bodies. They stay away from museums, art galleries, and plays in droves. They show poor taste in home furnishings and other forms of applied art and are unsympathetic and closed-minded to newer styles in art and music. And, perhaps far more important, we as a people are relatively shallow, obsessed with superficial aspects of living, and lacking in the development of a well thought-through value system. And we don't get along terribly well with each other or with ourselves.

Furthermore, our young people are aware, as no previous generation ever was, about the evils of the world: highly organized crime run by almost respectable business men; blatant abuse by public officials of conflict-of-interest situations; selfish efforts by professional and business people to avoid paying their fair share of taxes by all sorts of devious tactics; racist behavior which keeps blacks out of labor unions, out of neighborhoods, and out of social groups of many kinds -- and practiced even by the nicest people. The television screen is filled for most of its working hours with junk, alternating with advertising much of which is false or misleading.

And over it all, the Kafkaesque horror of being embroiled in an undeclared war that almost nobody wants and that nobody can stop.

This is the kind of world our more perceptive young people are looking at and dreaming of changing. It is really a hopeful sign that many of them are looking to schools and colleges to help them to prepare to live in this world and to change it.

I am in complete sympathy with those thoughtful youth when they complain that schools and colleges are largely irrelevant in giving this kind of help. I wish I could say that the youth feel positively about their counselors, but my impression is that, with few exceptions, their counselors are also seen as irrelevant.

This leads me to speak first to what their counselors should be doing in order to help our youth attain a truly better life, and then to suggest the things that counselor education programs need to do if they are to prepare that kind of counselor.

It seems to me that, if counselors had to be limited to one, and only one function, it might well be to serve as the school's conscience and the main source of feedback as to what it is doing wrong and what it should be doing right. Of course, I would hope that counselors would perform many functions, but I am saying that if time permitted only one, it might well be this one.

After all, individual counseling is very time consuming and, frankly, thus far of somewhat doubtful value. Furthermore, no kind of counseling is going to be of much value if students don't trust the counselor. Even if counselors were all very skilled in the more therapeutic kind of counseling -- and the fact is that very few are -- they would be fighting a losing battle if school and society remain relatively unchanging. Many of the explosions among students and other frustrated members of society are, after all, a pretty healthy response to a very frustrating society.

Of course, not all rebels are fighting the good fight. Some are expressing their neuroses, and others are just out for kicks. But many are fighting for a better world, for healthier values, for more humanistic institutions, and for a saner society.

So there is my biased viewpoint -- that the building of a healthier, more humane, and more rational society requires a great deal of change from the status quo. And to build that kind of society we need young people who are critical in their thinking, imaginative, courageous, and committed. And who will, while developing all these qualities and attitudes, also be acquiring the knowledge and the skill to do something constructive about their beliefs and values.

Relevant Counselors

I would like to see in schools, colleges, agencies, and other settings, counselors who will help contribute toward the development of that kind of person. This may be a pipe dream, but unless we are relevant in this respect, we will not be "with it" and will be just another of the long list of conservative forces which resist needed changes.

What kind of person must this counselor be? This is of course highly speculative, but I should think that he should have at least a high degree of understanding of that kind of youth, a high degree of ability to accept and empathize with that kind of youth, and, in my book, a high degree of sympathy for change.

And to do all that, I would think that this dream-counselor would himself have to possess a fair amount of the very qualities that I see as ideal for the youth they work with -- critical in their thinking, imaginative, courageous, and committed. How many of today's counselors fit the bill? I will leave that to you to answer.

Educating Counselors For Relevance

Now, how do we educate counselors for relevance? With my conception of relevance I must confess that I don't think that counselor education can do a great deal. I think that this is, to a much greater extent, a matter of choosing the right people in the first place. But, given that kind of person, what can counselor education do to help him be best prepared for the task? I would list several things.

First, we should stop playing the schizoid game of preparing counselors for settings that don't exist. That surely is being irrelevant. We should begin by asking what the reality is in the schools and colleges and agencies, and then search for ways to prepare counselors who can function effectively and productively in those settings. We can't continue to tell counselor-trainees that we aren't responsible for the fact that they are asked to do non-relevant things such as approving course changes, conducting ten minute "bandaid" interviews, and serving as managers of recruiting programs. We can't teach them how to function if they have a case load of 250 when we know they'll be working with 500 or 1000 or 1500; and will be for years.

We simply can't continue to tell our counselor education students that we can only teach them the right things to do, but that they must figure out some way to do them. This is, frankly, an irresponsible and wasteful game -- wasteful because our graduates are simply not able to do what we teach them to do. To make matters worse, they feel guilty about what they are doing and not doing and end up being very confused and upset. Some fall into line with what they are asked to do by their employers and will have to ignore most of what they learned in graduate school. Others leave the schools or the state rehabilitation agencies for places where they can more nearly do what they were taught to do. Those who absolutely cannot adjust to any applied setting will most likely become counselor educators.

I don't know what our graduate students <u>should</u> be taught to do, but I'm sure that it should be something other than what we now emphasize in most counselor education programs. As one example, instead of just incorporating the 50 minute therapeutic interview format, why not see what we can do with ten minute interviews? It might turn out to be quite a bit, if we put our imaginative minds to work on the problem. Similarly, in other ways that I cannot detail now, we could and should search for viable practices and patterns that will at least give counselors the wherewithal to reach and work with the children and youth in their schools or agencies in order to help them do something about themselves and their world.

Second, I think that we should include in our counselor education programs major components which have to do with the reality of the school or college or agency setting in which our graduates will work. We have too long assumed that anybody who has taught in a school understands about curriculum and teaching methods and the social psychology of the institution. The truth seems to me to be quite different; experienced teachers are most likely to have developed a dependent and passive attitude toward all these aspects of schools, rather than being critical scholars and scholarly critics. And if we expect counselors to do something actively to influence the social setting of the institution -- to try to influence the institution to change in ways that will make it a more humane and sensible place for people to learn and work -- then we must teach them to do these same things, just as we teach them to counsel -- and that should include supervised experience in addition to didactic instruction.

Which leads me to the next suggestion, that we stop wasting everybody's time in didactic courses which try to develop professional skills solely through lectures and textbook reading. I feel quite certain in my mind that most practitioners do not develop professional understanding, sensitivity, and skills unless they practice them in the most realistic, true-to-life settings possible. I feel quite certain too that most teaching of theory or technique that is done prior to laboratory, practicum, or internship experience is largely wasted. The storeroom conception of learning -- that one stores away all the little bits of information and theory until one day he is ready to apply them -- is, as far as I'm concerned, long disproven. The curve of forgetting is much more accelerated than the curve of learning -- at least for material which is learned in the traditional reading-lecture-and-discussion method. There are some topics for which that method is indeed appropriate, but these comprise a small portion of the total counselor education program.

We do our students another kind of disservice when we ask them to be their own theory integrators. I doubt that very many other fields expect that every practitioner develop his own theory. Yet that is what we sometimes do, when we present a series of theories, which by the way are taken mostly from the literature of psychotherapy, and tell students that we can't give them one integrated theoretical formulation but that each one must do the integration for himself. This is a close parallel to the kind of pseudo-Rogerian type of test interpretation in which a counselor, who with all his training doesn't know how to interpret tests, presents the raw data to his client and then asks the client to interpret them.

Finally, counselor education programs might try a little harder to serve as a model of the qualities they preach. For example, how relevant are counselor education programs in teaching the roles they recommend? Almost everybody for a couple of years now has been agreeing that group methods should be a major component of guidance programs. Yet how many counselor education programs now teach group methods thoroughly and seriously and meaningfully, which to my mind must include a good deal of supervised experience? As a second example, we have for decades criticized the inadequacy of educational and occupation information programs in schools. Yet how many counselor education programs offer supervised experience in this area? And as a third example, almost everybody is now agreeing that consultation is an important function for counselors in all settings. But who is teaching consultation specifically and concretely as a skill based on theory and research?

And if we are going to urge counselors to be flexible and to change, would we not be a little more persuasive if we changed our own programs, courses, reading lists, and lecture notes with at least the speed that we preach for others?

And finally, how many counselor education programs are using in their teaching the technological innovations that they tell their students to keep up with and to utilize in their work? Yet the professor has far more freedom to experiment and innovate than the counselor in a school, college, or agency. How many counselor education departments are presenting information about their programs in the ways they suggest that their students do orientation work with their students?

Conclusion

This, then, has been my thesis. I first selected, for the most relevant of relevances, the urgent necessity of major social change in this backward though technological society, a society which has shined brilliantly in physical technology but is miserably dull in its social, humanistic, and esthetic facets. I went on to say next that our hope for the future must rest on the children and youth of today, who, with all the help we can possibly give them, and a lot of luck, may be able to harness the technology so that it enriches rather than threatens life. If counselors are to help youth to develop into the kinds of adults who will be able to solve the awesome problems before them, then the counselors must in turn be far more active and capable than is true of counselors as a whole today.

And finally, to the point of my topic for today, counselor education programs must become very different from what they have been -- more attuned to reality, more flexible, and more nearly a model for counselors.

It is my belief that if counselor education programs do not come a good deal closer to meeting these needs, they will soon be regarded, by those who make the decisions and pay the bills, as irrelevant and unnecessary.